



Joseph Carey Merrick

This poem was used by Joseph Carey Merrick in a pamphlet accompanying his freak show, and later when he wrote to thank people for their generosity in caring for him.

Tis true my form is something odd.
But blaming me is blaming God;
Could I create myself anew,
I would not fail in pleasing you.
If I could reach from pole to pole,
Or grasp the ocean with a span,
I would be measured by the soul,
The mind's the standard of the man.

The times and tribulations of The Elephant Man, Joseph Carey Merrick have long been the subject of books, films and theatre. As a result, 'The Elephant Man' is without a doubt the most famous human prodigy of all time. His story garnered the sympathy of Victorian England and after the span of one hundred years, his plight remains no less heart wrenching or inspiring.

Several factual accounts state that Merrick's deformities were not extreme until about the age of five - he was born a seemingly normal baby on 5 August 1862, at 50 Lee Street, in Leicester, England, to Joseph Rockley and Mary Jane Merrick. But, at 21 months, his deformity first manifested with small bumps appearing on the left side of his body; he began developing swelling of his lips, followed by a bony lump on his forehead, which later grew to roughly resemble an elephant's trunk and loosing of his skin, and his skin grew loose and rough in texture. In later years, his left and right arms began to grow significant differences and both feet were enlarged. To add to his troubles, during his childhood he fell and suffered an injury to his hip which left him permanently lame. The family is said to have believed young Joseph's condition was caused by Mary Jane being frightened by an elephant at a fairground during her pregnancy.

Despite his physical appearance, the boy and his mother were close. A former housemaid, she was *also* handicapped and had three additional children, two of whom died at a young age: younger brother William Arthur and sister Marion Eliza. By the time he was age 11-or-12, she herself passed away on 19 May 1873 of bronchial-pneumonia. Her death devastated young Joseph. Not only did he lose his closest friend, but his father, now working as a haberdasher, soon married the strict widow Emma Wood Antill, who was their landlady at the time, and who had two children of her own and, constantly nagging and making remarks, making his life a misery, demanded young Merrick leave school and earn his living.

Amazingly, despite his growing abnormalities, he found employment at a cigar shop, but his right hand soon became too large to manage the delicate work of rolling cigars. In order to earn his keep, his father got Joseph a hawker's license to sell gloves door-to-door... but, many people slammed doors or ran terrified and the people who knew who he was would refuse to even answer their doors. Since his appearance frightened prospective customers, his sales were dismal. Joseph Senior would often beat his son if he came home empty-handed and the stepmother would deny him full meals unless he had earned enough to pay for them. When his stepmother expelled him from the house, young Joseph began struggling not only against his deformity, but starvation and homelessness, *as well*. He wandered the streets, selling what ever he could to afford scraps of food or basic lodgings.

Fortunately, Joseph's uncle Charles Merrick, a barber, took his nephew in, but the deformed young man was still unable to make much of a living peddling gloves. After two years, his license to sell was revoked on the grounds he was terrifying the community. With no other resource, he went into the Leicester workhouse system, a Victorian institution for the poor and destitute marked by cruelty. Victorian workhouses were not friendly places - they were akin to prisons, where the unemployed and unemployable toiled in the most unwanted laborious tasks of the era. He was 17 at the time, not three as is fictionally supposed. With the exception of a brief attempt to find work outside, Merrick remained in the workhouse for five years.

Merrick was most of the time unemployable, destitute and stripped of all his self-worth by the ignorance of the people of the day, and was prepared to take any job that would offer him a crust. He saw only one way out of his miserable existence. Despite hiding his face behind a burlap mask, Merrick still endured the constant harassment of local children and many adults - a source of great amusement for the scores of cold-hearted and cruel people, young and old, who would follow him from street to street, taunting him and calling out cruel names. Strangers had always stared at him, so why not get them to pay for the privilege? He contacted music-hall showman and performer Sam Torr who eventually sold his interest in Merrick to exhibitor Tom Norman, who treated Merrick with great care and respect when they were working together. Merrick was after all a 'performer' in a lucrative field of 'entertainment.' The experience left him rather well off - and he amassed some £200.

It was Norman who, on 29 August 1884, brought Merrick to Mile End Road in London, (*now the London Sari Centre*), to be exhibited as a curiosity attraction in the shop opposite the London Hospital where Sir Frederick Treves M.D. found him, giving him one of his business cards to allow smooth passage into the Hospital after Merrick politely declined an examination. Showing himself as a terrifying oddity was his only means of financial support and it was

probably not a happy way to earn his keep, but, unlike the prayed-upon wretch of popular opinion, Merrick was the one who contacted his manager rather the other way around. Further, the depiction of Treves as a drunken bully has been disputed, and it is claimed that he not only chronicled Merrick's life but befriended and treated him fairly and kindly, unlike the brutal depiction of unsubstantiated rumour.

After Treves arranged a private viewing in the confines of the London Hospital, examining Merrick over the following week and taking photographs. Treves then lost track of Merrick for 2 years, the latter returning to his sideshow, having to move on to Belgium with an Italian after the Freakshows in London were closed down and the police started to become more proactive. The Belgians were no more hospitable and his Austrian manager (again not the fictional Ross) treated him badly, abandoning him and absconding with his savings of £50. Not only was he alone and in a foreign land, but he also contracted a severe bronchial infection further complicated by his deformities. This must of been most disturbing for Merrick as he had trouble getting people to understand his speech at the best of times let alone abroad. Merrick, though, was resourceful in this terrible situation and pawned the few belongings he had to pay for the journey back to London.

Merrick found his way back to his home country - and upon his return to London, was involved in a disturbance at Liverpool Street train station when his masked appearance and twisted body caused hysteria. The police took him in custody, but his speech was unintelligible due to his bronchial infection. He had retained the business card of Dr. Treves, which he presented to authorities. Treves was quickly summoned from the London Hospital and soon arranged for Merrick to be given permanent quarters in the hospital in an isolated attic room, and began to look for a way to care for the man. In a letter to the London Times, detailing Merrick's deformities, he appealed to the general public for financial aid to support the wretched "Elephant Man" - and, within the week, enough funds were raised to keep him at the Hospital for life. But hospitals had the policy to never offer their beds to those with incurable illnesses or diseases. A permanent home was what was needed.

Philanthropists and well-doers from every corner of Britain and Europe were writing in to the Whitechapel Hospital (London Hospital), offering all kinds assistance, in addition, large amounts of money were offered to look after Joseph. Enormous pressure was placed on the Whitechapel Hospital to give this "Child of England" a permanent home. Although, it was only after the British Royal family became involved that the hospital finally agreed to allow him to stay indefinitely in a side annex of the hospital. However, Treves later commented that Merrick always wanted, even after living at the hospital, to go to a hospital for the blind where he might find a woman who would not be repelled by his appearance and love him.

It was during this time that Joseph Merrick thrived. Despite a living in constant physical and emotional pain, the Elephant Man possessed an indomitable spirit. He quickly became the subject of much public sympathy and something of a celebrity in Victorian high society. In the play and film, Merrick meets the actress Madge Kendal, the first woman to shake his hand and the first outside his mother to treat him with kindness. In reality, the two probably never met. According to Howell and Ford's biography, while Mrs. Kendal did help raise funds for Merrick's upkeep and frequently sent him gifts including the newly invented gramophone and a photograph of herself, there is no record in her memoirs of a personal encounter. But her husband, W.H. Kendal, an actor and former medical student, did visit Merrick in his early days at the London Hospital. In Treves' account, Merrick's first female tête-à-tête, was a brief interview with a pretty friend of the doctor's named Mrs. Leila Maturin. As in the play, Alexandra, then Princess of Wales and later Queen Consort, did meet with Merrick and demonstrated a kindly interest in him, leading other members of the upper class to embrace him. Princess Alexandra, who took him warmly by the hand and talked to him as a friend, visited him on many occasions sending him many letters and even a signed photo which Merrick held as some kind of sacred item allowing no-one but himself to touch... and habitually sent him a Christmas card every year. He eventually became a favourite of Queen Victoria.

Treves knew that for Merrick to become as normal a human being as possible he would need to form relationships with other people, women were considered more important than men as it was women who were most frightened of him and who he had an almost adoring attitude towards. The only woman in Merrick's life was his mother and the characters in the romance novels he read so enthusiastically. Treves knew of a pretty widow who he asked if she would enter Merrick's room shake him by the hand and smile, a simple task if it were not for his terrible appearance. This she accomplished but not with the expected response, Merrick broke down in tears after she greeted him later telling Treves that she was the first woman in his whole life except for his mother who had showed him any kindness.

From that day onwards Treves witnessed a great change in Merrick, he was getting a vast amount of letters and visits from many well to do women who all welcomed him with kindness. This was a drastic change as Merrick who once hid behind his sheets whenever someone entered his room was now meeting with Duchesses and Countesses. He became more and more confident and less aware of his appearance (something Treves puts down to the absence of mirrors in his house).

Merrick had a childlike imagination and would imagine that he was a handsome gentleman about town or the hero in one of his romance novels. He grew a library and spent most of his time reading and visiting with people. In his later years, he found some solace in writing, composing remarkable heartfelt prose and poetry. One of his chief hobbies was building models of famous sites. His miniature reproduction of Mainz Cathedral, which figures prominently in the play, is on exhibit at the Hospital today.

In the summer of 1887, Merrick spent time vacationing at the Fawsley Hall estate, Northamptonshire. Special measures were taken for his journey there as he was forced to travel in a carriage with blinds drawn. Merrick enjoyed

his time away from urban London greatly and collected wildflowers to take back with him to London. He visited Fawsley Hall again in 1888 and 1889.

Joseph Merrick was cared for at the hospital until his death at age 27, which occurred in April 1890, when he was discovered lying on his back in his bed at Bedstead Square. The weight of his head, which would have crushed his windpipe, prevented him from sleeping normally so he had to get his rest sitting up, supported by pillows with his arms clasped around his knees. Merrick's death was ruled an accident and Treves concluded that he was experimenting with sleeping in an attempt to imitate normal behaviour - a desire that haunted his entire life - to sleep as normal people do.

Merrick's preserved skeleton was previously on display at the Royal London Hospital. While his remains can no longer be viewed by the public, there is a small museum focused on his life, which houses some of his personal effects and period Merrick memorabilia.

Joseph Merrick was originally thought to be suffering from elephantiasis. In 1971, Ashley Montagu suggested in the book *The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity* that Merrick suffered from neurofibromatosis type I, a genetic disorder also known as von Recklinghausen's disease. NF1 is still strongly associated with Joseph Merrick in the mind of the public; however, it was postulated in 1986 that Merrick actually suffered from Proteus syndrome, a condition which had only been identified in 1979. As it stands, we don't know exactly what Merrick suffered from but many people still mistakenly refer to his condition as elephantiasis.